IN LARGE PART, and especially at the beginning, it was a boat, meant to do what boats do. That’s how the builder talked about it. When asked about her background, she most often told a story in varying detail about an American father working in Japan when the war broke out. He had married a Japanese woman named Tawana, and they had three children. After the mother and the youngest child were killed in the Doolittle raids over Tokyo, Kea, her brother, and father took a boat across the ocean to California. When a typhoon hit, the frightened girl vowed “I would become a ship’s master, never again its cargo.”

Other, perhaps firmer, evidence points to a childhood spent on and around a Hopi reservation in northern Arizona. But the rocky mesas of northern Arizona do not as satisfactorily account for Kea’s later fascination with and commitment to ark-building and her Melvillean sense that, when all goes wrong, one properly heads out to sea.

Whether they began across the Pacific or only the continent, Kea Tawana’s wanderings eventually brought her to Newark. She may have arrived, traumas in tow, as early as the mid-1950s. But she seems to have moved around the area a bit before settling down in Newark around 1966, constructing a house on a truck bed so that she might remain mobile. She eventually parked it in an empty lot on Camden Street. But home seemed always beyond her grasp.

Late on August 8, 1982, Kea opened a logbook and wrote about her first day building an ark. She recorded its location in degrees and minutes, then: “No seas, weather fair, the keel was laid on the ways at 11:30 hours by myself.” She later told a reporter that the ark’s maiden voyage would be back to Japan, to visit her mother’s grave and tell her that her daughter had turned out worthwhile. At other times, she expressed a general longing to sail away and live in peace on the seas, a sense that life on land had grown too tough – too belligerent, polluted, and corrupt.

She continued to build on her own for several years. And as she accumulated materials, joined them, and the ark grew, so did its meanings. And as people took notice on the way to work or school or looking out their back window or front door, the meanings accumulated and the ark expanded from boat to icon, from structure to symbol. It was, as one critic wrote, a sort of “inadvertent art.” And around something built to flee the city condensed a drama that became integral to Newark’s late twentieth-century story.

A PROJECT BY GALLERY AFERRO AND THE CLEMENT A. PRICE INSTITUTE ON ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND THE MODERN EXPERIENCE, RUTGERS-NEWARK UNIVERSITY

ON VIEW SEPTEMBER 24 - DECEMBER 17 2016 GALLERY AFERRO 73 MARKET ST NEWARK NJ
Kea built a very viable ark out of a city that was disfiguring. The older Newark of wood-frame single homes, century-old school buildings, and housing industrial plants was coming down, and so was a recycled, working deindustrialization, jobs cheap, since she wanted the material more than the money, and otherwise picking over the city’s abandoned and crumbling infrastructure. She carried it all back to Camden Street on a baby carriage, a handcart, or her back, which had, she said, “is working load of 600 pounds.” As the hull took shape out of the sturdy timbers of Newark’s more affluent past, piling stones served as its ballast. Iron from fire-escapes and fencing found its way into the ark, and a clothsline pole, sink, and toilet formed a plumbing system, while the transformer from an old-siloerat skeleton, connected to a gas generator, would provide electricity. Glass from churches and banks would become porthole windows. A clothesline pole served as a bowsprit, and the ark flew a 48-star flag found in her old school. Kean continued assembling and joining, and in five years the ark had grown to almost thirty feet high, twenty feet wide, and eighty-six feet long. Estimates ran from 60 to 150 tons.

The astonishing length, rising on an empty lot in the Central Ward, at least two miles from water, was at once, in its gathered components, the literal embodiment of the physical landscape, but also of the lives lived among it. From any water, was at once, in its gathered components, the literal embodiment of the physical landscape, but also of the lives lived among it. This astonishing boat, rising on an empty lot in the Central Ward, at least two miles from water, was at once, in its gathered components, the literal embodiment of the physical landscape, but also of the lives lived among it. It took about four years for official Newark to take much notice of the ark. The ark was somehow seen as an impediment to this project, whether because it was an eyesore that would discourage people from moving to the area, a dangerous load of 400 pounds.” As the hull took shape out of the sturdy timbers of Newark’s more affluent past, piling stones served as its ballast. Iron from fire-escapes and fencing found its way into the ark, and a clothsline pole, sink, and toilet formed a plumbing system, while the transformer from an old-siloerat skeleton, connected to a gas generator, would provide electricity. Glass from churches and banks would become porthole windows. A clothesline pole served as a bowsprit, and the ark flew a 48-star flag found in her old school. Kean continued assembling and joining, and in five years the ark had grown to almost thirty feet high, twenty feet wide, and eighty-six feet long. Estimates ran from 60 to 150 tons.

Yet it also made clear the possibility of dreaming beyond that destruction, of imagining and constructing alternative futures that balanced precariously between dropping anchor and sailing away. Kean talked of riggers who had offered to get the ark to the Passaic River and of helicopters strong enough to airlift it there. But few thought that feasible. Fewer still seemed to want that anyway. Among those who did were several very powerful forces in urban development, and they demonstrated that the ark, for all its weight and size, was ultimately secured in the unstable conditions of Kean’s marginality.

It took about four years for official Newark to take much notice of the ark. In early 1984, the lot on which it sat was sold to city agencies. New Community Corporation, nearing its third decade of building affordable housing and providing much-needed services in the Central Ward, purchased the land with the intention of building a new housing complex on it. That March, Kean rolled up a roller trolley system – the same method, she explained, “as the Egyptians used to move the blocks for the pyramids” – and moved the ark about twenty-feet onto the parking lot of Humanity Baptist Church, which she served as a general caretaker for 100 a month.

The adjourned lot, however, wasn’t far enough for those charged with the redvelopment of the Central Ward. Chief among them was Sharpe James, the new mayor who owned office with promises of a reenergized housing development program.

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The adjourned lot, however, wasn’t far enough for those charged with the redvelopment of the Central Ward. Chief among them was Sharpe James, the new mayor who owned office with promises of a reenergized housing development program. The ark was somewhere seen as an impediment to this project, whether because it was an eyesore that would discourage people from moving to the area, a dangerous

As the battle raged and a county Superior Court judge issued injunctions preventing the ark’s immediate destruction, Kean began to embrace the broader, social meanings that had accrued to the ark. No longer just a personal escape vessel, the ark became a center of the proposed city park with baseball fields and playgrounds. It could serve as a recreation area and community center. She imagined the ark as a public park, which could be used for concerts and events, serving the community and neighborhood.

But through the summer and fall of 1987, Kean’s battle continued and eventually secured an amendment that the city would not destroy the ark if it could be moved to another location. Kean began to design and render drawings, so that the ark might fit under city power lines on its way to Newark Bay. She said she planned to set it up to the Great Lakes and travel there. But by early March 1988, she felt the ark was “doomed.” Instead of stepping up at the upper deck, she continued to dismantle, purging at salvaged nails with a sledgehammer, along through by passing workers with a chainaw. At one point, she hoped to at least get a much-reduced ark – little more than a canoe – into the water. After three deadline-missed deadlines, a judge finally ordered the ark razed. Kean sold the remains for what she could.
KEA AND HER ARK: A TIMELINE

- **1933** the year of Kea's birth, according to a letter she wrote in the early 1990s
- **October 22, 1940** Kea's birthday, according to official ID cards from the early 2000s
- **1952-1953** Kea moves east, spends time in Harlem
- **1954-1957** Kea's first years in Newark
- **1957-1966** Kea moves around the region, including years in Morristown and Brooklyn; works a number of jobs, including construction at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows
- **1966** Kea moves back to Newark to run the metal shop at Guardian Fence and Construction Co., 463 Clinton Ave, living over the shop
- **1967** Kea moves out of the Clinton Avenue apartment after the riots, to 759 Hunterdon Street. While there, she begins building a house on a truck bed, so that it’s mobile
- **1972 or 1973** Kea moves the house to an abandoned lot on Camden Street
- **August 8, 1982** Kea lays the keel to an ark near her house; she will continue to build for more than five years
- **January 1984** An Associated Press story about the ark is run in newspapers around the country
- **May 1986** After New Community Corporation buys the land, Kea moves the now three-story ark twenty-five feet to the parking lot of Humanity Baptist Church
- **July 1986** Kea meets with recently elected Mayor Sharpe James and promises she’ll finish or move the ark by the end of the year
- **January 1987** The ark is still there
- **February 1987** The ark is still there
- **March 1987** Inspectors from the municipal Department of Land Use Control cite the ark for numerous violations of living and construction codes
- **Spring 1987** The City of Newark threatens Humanity Baptist’s tax-exempt status over the existence of the ark, which it deems a structure being used for non-religious purposes. As a result, the church’s pastor declines to seek a zoning variance for the ark
- **Mid-April, 1987** The city intends to begin destruction of the ark around this time
- **April 1, 1987** despite the support of three city council members, a motion to extend the deadline for demolition fails
- **April 10, 1987** Superior Court judge issues a temporary restraining order preventing the city from destroying the ark for at least three weeks, until he can determine its purpose and determine what to do with it
- **May 6, 1987** City Council considers amending zoning codes to prohibit shipbuilding
- **June 1987** Kea’s lawyer serves the City of Newark a notice of claims for damages charging she has suffered physical and financial hardships due to their efforts to destroy the ark
- **June 1987** Kea envisions a new city park with the ark at its center
- **July 6, 1987** Newsweek names Kea one of America’s “unsung heroes”
- **October 1987** Agreement reached with city whereby Kea given until late March to move the ark. The deadline is eventually extended.
- **March 1988** Kea begins dismantling the ark’s upper decks, as a precursor to moving it down to the Passaic River; she asks for, and is granted, an extension of the deadline
- **June 15, 1988** The ark is gone
- **June 16, 1988** In light of the ark’s dismantling, a Superior Court judge grants Kea a 30-day extension on the removal of her house from the site
- **October 1988** Kea is still in her house on the site
- **November 1988** Kea is still in her house on the site
- **December 8-9, 1988** Kea holds police and demolition workers at bay by threatening to shoot them and set her house and herself ablaze
- **December 17, 1988** After reaching a deal with the city, Kea’s house is towed to a nearby vacant lot
- **December 27, 1988** Kea moves her house again, to Scott Street
- **September 18, 1989** police try to evict Kea, and she is arrested for threatening them
- **1989** Kea moves out of Newark, eventually landing in Port Jervis, NY
- **August 4, 2016** Kea dies at home in Port Jervis